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SHORTGRASS COUNTRY by Monte Noelke

At the time of this writing, eight or 10 men are standing around the barn waiting for the sheep to dry out enough to shear.

Light, wispy mist passed over earlier in the day. Slight degrees of humidity dampen wool, and drying the fleeces after they are sacked, is a long and arduous task no one wants to do a second time.

In other times, rain delays were used to haul up wood for camp cooks, shoe horses and butcher fat kid goats to roast over the coals of an open fire.

Congeniality ruled, or it does in my memories; eating off tin plates and listening to the cowboys and shearers exchanging crude stories and teasing the younger hands. For those short moments hunkered down underneath makeshift shelter, racial and occupational barriers fell to the side.

Nowadays, however, different boundaries exclude camaraderie. After we round up and count the sheep, the wool grader takes over in the pens. The capitan is a very cordial and responsible man; nevertheless, our contacts are limited to short morning conferences followed by directions where to move to set up in the next set of corrals.

The uncertainty of where we stand on workman's comp law, and mainly where we stand with the carriers of that

fateful insurance, ended the era of contact with the shearing crew. If a concept as outlandish as the one claiming an employer is responsible for insuring an independent contractor's workers can be supported, I am going to take the chance of meeting Old Shorty, or Chato on a three-day shearing job and end up taking the chance of being responsible for their child support payments, or back alimony tariffs, or tax liens.

Two years ago, I stopped waving at the guy who runs the county road grader, and I have my laundry dropped off over in town, so the ole gal running the delivery wagon for the San Angelo based laundry can't claim I'm her boss.

Word spread last week that workman's comp rates jumped a full 7 percentage points on ranch accounts. I've been wanting to reroof a house over in town, but I might better wait until it's clear as to whether I come under the risk factor for agriculture, or the one on hot tar and stepping on shingle nails.